

OP-EDS

ABOLITIONISM WAS, AND STILL IS, NO FAILURE

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Historian Jon Grinspan argues (“[Was Abolitionism a Failure?](#)” *New York Times*, February 1) against modern-day activists, from the Heritage Foundation’s Jim DeMint to MSNBC host Chris Hayes, who view abolitionism as a successful movement worth emulating. Grinspan credits slavery’s end not to abolitionists’ unbending ideals but to “the flexibility of ... moderates.” Slavery died because its advocates were even less willing to compromise.

But all new ideas are the work of extremists. There’s no need to preemptively tone them down; that will happen with their implementation anyway. The Libertarian Party’s call for “the cessation of state oppression and harassment of homosexual men and women, that they, at last, be accorded their full rights as individuals” was extremist [in 1976](#).

The unmatched sea change in views on gay rights since then was in spite of the realpolitik of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Voltairine de Cleyre summed up pre-Civil War attempts to impede slavery by political compromise as “one long record of ‘how-not-to-do-it.’” For both issues, the reshaping would, in Yale lawyer Charles Reich’s phrase, “originate with the individual and with culture, and ... change the political structure only as its final act.”

Grinspan points out the slaveholders’ many strategic mistakes. But an abolitionist victory by default would have been Pyrrhic in the long run. Instead, they led a permanent shift in the range of acceptable public views. Only thus could they put an institution granted respectability for millennia into the dustbin of history. To Grinspan, the sheer range of causes likened to abolitionism — DeMint’s Tea Party; Hayes’ climate change — is proof that such invoking is devoid of content. But the impact of abolitionism is visible: All those causes frame themselves as *liberation* movements. Slavery was unabashedly authoritarian.

The Liberty Party was the most uncompromising abolitionist political party. Grinspan notes its vote-getting was anemic. Yet it became the core around which dissidents from the mainstream Whig and Democratic parties formed the more successful Free Soil Party (whose slogan “Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor and Free Men” shows the natural interlock of liberations).

Grinspan downplays the main abolitionist publication, William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, because its circulation was less than 3,000. That happens to be **the number of copies of** the first edition of Karl Marx's *Capital* sold in Russia. Garrison's unyielding advocacy for full abolition forestalled Free Soil's dissipation. The party in turn formed the basis for the Republican Party of Lincoln.

As Murray Rothbard explained, abolitionism is not just of "antiquarian interest." Since "there are a great many analogues to slavery today ... similar alternatives will have to be faced once more." And similar tactics remain the most effective way to face them.

New Yorker Joel Schlosberg is a contributing editor at The William Lloyd Garrison Center for Libertarian Advocacy Journalism (thegarrisoncenter.org).

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